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STUDY PROJECT

THE TRIPLE NICKELS: A GENESIS FOR CHANGE

BY

COLONEL JAMES F. JORDAN, SC

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The early 1940's began an era that sparked movements within the Black community to eliminate segregation and bring about improved social conditions. Black leaders believed that the armed forces could be used as a means to promote these needed social changes. With the war in Europe, the time seemed appropriate to demonstrate the will and ability of Blacks to perform in combat other than in service roles. An all Black paratroop infantry unit was formed during World War II that was used as a means to appease the Black community. This unit was formed at Fort Benning, Georgia, initially as a test platoon and eventually grew into the largest battalion in the United States Army. Although Black Americans had a legacy of demonstrated bravery in combat throughout history, White Americans had relegated Blacks to performing menial tasks in service units to perpetuate stereotypical beliefs. The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion challenged these limitations and became one of the first elite all-Black units in the Army. With the Army leaders and the War Department observing, they became a catalyst for changing how Blacks would be utilized in the Army. This paper begins with a discussion of the political and racial attitudes that were being challenged prior to the formation of the unit. The following chapters present a description of the events and conditions affecting the unit in its quest for change. The achievements of the unit are also cited until it lost its identity when it was integrated into the 82d Airborne Division.

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THE TRIPLE NICKELS: A GENESIS FOR CHANGE
AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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(Story)

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THE TRIPLE NICKELS
A GENESIS FOR CHANGE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On the eve of World War II, the role of most Black Americans in the armed forces was limited to performing menial tasks in service units that supported the combat forces. They were not permitted to be assigned to or perform in combat units even though they had demonstrated their ability to fight throughout America's history. The recent history of Black Americans had been clouded with racial propaganda programs directed toward them which had affected the way White Americans related to them. These same attitudes were reflected in the racial conditions of the armed forces and greatly influenced how Blacks were utilized during WWII.

Black Americans began to take action to change their plight and to improve their conditions in society during the early 1940's. Black leaders saw the armed forces as a means to bring about changes and to improve racial and social conditions. Like Blacks of previous wars, those of WWII believed that their service as arms bearers and workers on the homefront would bring about changes favorable to their group.¹

This paper will present a historical description of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion (PIB), its accomplishments and the social mores it faced daily in order to prove it could meet

the challenges. When it became a part of the 82d Airborne Division, it marked a change in the utilization of Blacks in the U.S. Army and helped to prove Black soldiers had the right to serve where they were qualified.

CHAPTER II

SETTING THE STAGE

Significant changes began to occur because of pressure from Black leaders and the Black community. President Roosevelt knew that he needed Black Americans to win the 1940 Presidential election, thus his aides met with Black leaders to address their concerns. They stated their concerns based on the following:

(1) Segregation was morally wrong since it embodied an undemocratic doctrine of racial inferiority; (2) segregation denied full military opportunities to Black soldiers, relegated them to an inferior status, and destroyed their esprit-de-corps; and (3) segregation was an unnecessary luxury.²

For President Roosevelt to receive the Black vote, leaders wanted the following: (1) segregation in the armed forces abolished; (2) Colonel Benjamin O. Davis promoted to Brigadier General; (3) Major Campbell C. Johnson appointed assistant to the Selective Service Director and Judge William H. Hastie appointed as an Assistant Secretary in the War Department.³ The government yielded to all of the demands except one, the abolishment of segregation in the armed forces. Judge Hastie was appointed Civilian Aid to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson on November 1, 1940. The appointment of Judge Hastie would become

the catalyst to revolutionize the status and treatment of Blacks in the armed services.⁴ Secretary Stimson's letter to Judge Hastie charged him with assisting the War Department in developing administrative policies that would insure the fair and most effective use of Black manpower in the armed services.⁵

In September 1941, Judge Hastie recommended integrating the Army with small cohesive units. Before the War Department could act on this, the United States entered WWII. This provided the Army General Staff with the rationale for recommending to the War Department that Hastie's proposal be rejected on the grounds it was based on social principles rather than military expertise. General George C. Marshall, the Chief of Staff, insisted that the Army not attempt to solve a major social problem by adopting Hastie's recommendation. General Marshall stated the War Department's official position that the Army would not be used as a "social laboratory" for effecting social change.⁶

Integration of the armed services had become a major topic within the White community in 1942. Racial clashes were not uncommon. Hastie intensified his efforts to force the War Department to increase the number of Black soldiers in the Army and to utilize them in areas other than labor and supply units.⁷ He recommended to Adjutant General H.B. Lewis that he urge the Public Relations Bureau to amplify advertising for the recruitment of Blacks.⁸

Assistant Secretary of War John J. Mcloy formed the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies in August 1942. In December

1942, Secretary Mcloy's committee presented the following recommendations to Army Chief of Staff, General Marshall.

- the assignment of Black Americans to combat arms previously restricted to White Americans.

- formation of "an all-Negro parachute battalion"

These actions were recommended to enhance the morale and esprit-de-corps of the Negro people. General Marshall wrote in the margin of the report in February 1943, "start a company".⁹ Marshall's guidance was part of the genesis for changing how Blacks would be utilized in the Army and authorized the start of what would eventually become the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion.

ENDNOTES

1. Phillip Mcguire, He Too Spoke for Democracy, p.XII.
2. Ibid., P. 8.
3. Ibid., p. 9.
4. Ibid., p. XIII.
5. Ibid., p. XIV.
6. Ibid., p. 29.
7. Ibid., p. 34.
8. Ibid., p. 34.
9. Gerard M. Devlin, Paratrooper, p. 199.

CHAPTER III

FORT BENNING-PROVING THEY COULD JUMP

One of the first Black volunteers to be assigned to the Parachute School at Fort Benning, Georgia was Sergeant Clarence H. Beavers. He had volunteered and had been transferred to Fort Benning in April 1943 in order to receive jump training. His assignment was an error because active recruiting for the all Black parachute company had not begun. Sergeant Beavers was assigned to Service Company of the Parachute School as the company clerk until active recruiting began.¹

Active recruiting of Black personnel to participate in airborne training began in the fall of 1943. Major Holman D. Hoover, the Adjutant of the Parachute School, was given responsibility for screening and recruiting volunteers, both officers and non-commissioned officers.² He went to Fort Huachuca and interviewed several who wanted to be jumpers. There he could select candidates from the Black 92d and 93d Divisions and their supporting troops. Of the twenty enlisted men who would make up the initial test platoon, sixteen came from the 92d Division along with three of its original six officers.³

In November 1943, orders were issued authorizing the formation of the 555th Test Platoon. Enlisted personnel from the 92d Infantry Division arrived at Fort Benning, Georgia, on December 20, 1943. These personnel, along with three volunteers from Service Company of the Parachute School, were relocated to the Alabama Training Area during the week of December 27, 1943.

The enlisted personnel started training and conditioning exercises immediately; the officers would commence their training later. Captain William V. Johnson (White) was assigned as the commander and First Sergeant Walter H. Morris was assigned as first sergeant.⁴ The Test Platoon of the 555th Parachute Infantry Company was activated on December 30, 1943.⁵ This started a new chapter in military history, one that would help to change the social consciousness of White America and how Blacks were utilized in the Army.

The men recruited for the test platoon were some of the most intelligent and physically able men in the Army. Most had received tough infantry training in the desert, mountains, and heat of Fort Huachuca, and had been handpicked by Major Hoover to participate in the parachutist training. Some were even former university students, professional athletes and outstanding non-commissioned officers.⁶

The racial climate which they met in Columbus, Georgia, was like that throughout the South. The railroad station where they arrived in Columbus was ugly and smelly and was permeated with the heavy racist atmosphere of the South, complete with separate facilities for "White" and "Colored".⁷

Conflicts between Black soldiers and White civilians in and about Army bases were continuous and many reports about such incidents were sent to the War Department to Judge Hastie's office. The protests by Black soldiers occupied much of Judge Hastie's attention. Hardly a month passed that Black soldiers

did not complain about being in the South and suffering from the humiliation and abuse heaped upon them by White civilians and White military police.⁸ This was the traditional climate that faced these bold pioneers in Columbus and Fort Benning as they began their quest to change the role of Blacks in the Army.

The airborne training that paratroopers participated in back then was similar to that of today but more rigorous. It was conducted in four stages over a four week period and was designed to physically prepare the soldiers and to teach them all the necessary skills needed to perform as a paratrooper. Some of the trainees believed members of the Parachute School were betting whether the test platoon would jump or not. Most of the instructors, who were White, were fair, but some appeared to be trying to make sure the men would not complete the training.⁹

The initial A-stage training was designed to produce physical conditioning and stamina. The men were also taught how to take care of themselves and their equipment, how to exit an aircraft through a mock door, and how to collapse a parachute dragging across the ground.¹⁰

B-stage training was conducted to prepare the soldiers for jumping by suspending them in a parachute harness. They were also taught commands for exiting an aircraft by practicing in the mockup of the aft-compartment of an aircraft. The jump commands of "Get ready", "Stand up", "Hook up", "Check equipment", "Sound off for equipment check", "Stand in the door", and "Ready go" were programmed into their minds until their responses were

almost automatic.¹¹ Jumping from the thirty-four foot tower tested the trainees' nerve as well as their ability to execute the jump commands.

Advanced training in C-stage consisted of parachuting from a 250-foot control tower and a 250-foot free tower. The descent from the free tower allowed the parachutist to control the parachute and practice moves for maneuvering the parachute. Successful completion of this stage prepared the parachutist for the final stage where all skills learned were to be tested together.¹²

The final stage of training was D-stage. During this stage, the parachutists learned how to pack parachutes and were required to make five jumps from an airplane, four during the day and one at night. The men knew that jumping from a plane could be extremely dangerous. Still, being full of airborne propaganda, they were prepared to make their mark in history.

On Monday, January 24, 1944, sixteen men from the test platoon loaded onto a C-47 and prepared to make their first parachute jump. A spotter plane flew on the right wing of the C-47 to take pictures of this momentous event. The jump order was:

S/SGT Calvin R. Beal
SGT Clarence H. Beavers
SGT Ned B. Bess
S/SGT Hubert Bridges
S/SGT Lonnie M. Duke
S/SGT Robert F. Greene
SGT James E. Kornegay
CPL Godfrey McKinley
T/5 Alvin L. Moon
1SG Walter J. Morris
SGT Leo D. Reed
SGT Samuel W. Robinson

SGT Jack D. Tillis
SGT Roger S. Walden
SGT Daniel C. Seil
SGT Elijah Wesby

These pioneers completed all of the jump requirements on Monday night January 31, 1944. On February 1, 1944, Brigadier General Ridgely Gaither, Commandant of the Paracnute School, along with the company commander, Captain William V. Johnson, presented the men parachute wings for successfully completing training.¹³ These proud Black American soldiers became the first Black paratroopers in the U.S. Army. It would be only one of many firsts that they would record.

Six Black officers had arrived at Fort Benning to receive training right after the enlisted men had started. They also received training from an all White cadre. Some of the instructors had grown up in the racist culture of the deep South and were hard-driving and tough. But, because of the camaraderie of the airborne club or out of respect to the officers, the officers sensed no racial undertones in the attitudes or actions of the instructors.¹⁴ On March 4, 1944, in a review before Brigadier General Gaither, the first Black officers for the 555th Parachute Infantry Company received their parachutist wings.

They were:

1LT Jasper E. Ross
2LT Bradley Biggs
2LT Clifford Allen
2LT Edward D. Baker
2LT Warren C. Cornelius
2LT Edwin H. Wills

These officers and the enlisted men who had graduated before them

would form the cadre for processing and training other Black volunteer parachutists.¹⁵

The men of this first Black test platoon had proven that they could jump from airplanes but more challenges lay ahead. Along with training the new volunteers, they were to receive training in jumpmastering, pathfinding, communications, demolition, rigging and camouflaging.¹⁶

By May of 1944, ten officers and about 160 enlisted personnel had been trained. There were now three first lieutenants assigned with the following order of seniority, First Lieutenant Jasper Ross, First Lieutenant Richard W. Williams and First Lieutenant James H. Porter. General Gaither visited Captain William V. Johnson and asked him who he thought should be company commander. Captain Johnson recommended Porter even though he was the most junior. Captain Johnson was then transferred and First Lieutenant Porter became Commander, 555th Parachute Infantry Company (PIC), in May 1944.¹⁷

Following a visit to the 555th PIC area, General Gaither decided to put the unit through Advanced Tactical Division (ATD) training. This training included individual as well as squad platoon tactics.¹⁸ It was designed to prepare paratroopers to be assigned into a replacement pool for airborne units. However, the 555th PIC had the unique advantage of training together and being able to improve their skills by remaining a cohesive unit after training. They conducted several day and night jumps

with full combat equipment to hone their skills.¹⁹

The social life of these soldiers was greatly influenced by the racial climate in the area. Soldiers used extreme precaution to avoid problems with the Columbus police when they visited the city. At the slightest provocation, police would arrest Blacks and jail them in lieu of fines.

Racism persisted on post as well, but with some differences. Blacks were permitted to use the theatre in the airborne area of the post and sit where they pleased regardless of color. However, Blacks were not welcomed in the non-commissioned officers and officers clubs.²⁰

After completing ATD training, the troopers had more time for socializing. Some would head for the Peachtree Street Service Center in Atlanta where some of the most beautiful Black Southern Belles were to be found. Others would go to Columbus to the Black community for socializing. Their fearlessness, confidence and pride in their accomplishments were displayed wherever they went, on and off post. Sometimes their exuberance got them into arguments with other Black soldiers who were not paratroopers. However, the appearance of the troopers and the knowledge of their prowess normally prevented any physical conflict.²¹

NORTH CAROLINA-PREPARING FOR COMBAT

In July of 1944, the 555th Parachute Infantry Company relocated from Fort Benning, Georgia, to Camp Mackall, North

Carolina, arriving on July 17, 1944. Camp Mackall had been transformed into the headquarters of the new Army Airborne Command, complete with facilities, runways, ranges, and maneuver areas to provide the best unit combat training possible. It was here the 555th Parachute Infantry Company was deactivated and redesignated Company A, 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, effective November 25, 1944.²²

The unit continued to face much the same racial atmosphere in and around Camp Mackall that they had experienced at Fort Benning. Post recreation facilities and theatres were divided along racial lines in the southern tradition. However, the Black and White soldiers used the post exchanges with no restrictions. Black officers had no problems using the White officers clubs; eventually, service clubs and guest room facilities were provided for enlisted personnel. These privileges came about only because of the continued persistence of Captain Porter, the battalion commander.²³

Traditional racial attitudes and restrictions existed in the communities around Camp Mackall. However, in Southern Pines, a winter resort and writers colony some 30 miles away, some of the officers and men who had wives and families with them were able to find housing in reasonably tolerant surroundings.

The 555th PIB experienced severe growing pains in trying to arrive at its authorized strength of 29 officers, one warrant officer and 600 enlisted men.²⁴ One of the first problems

encountered was the shortage of officer personnel. In December 1944 and January 1945, key officer positions were filled. However, the problem of filling enlisted positions was enormous. The organization submitted requisitions for fillers and volunteered to send out organizational recruiting teams to get personnel to volunteer for parachute training. The requisitioning process failed to produce results and the recruiting proposal was denied. The War Department then requested Negro personnel apply for parachute training and stated that all applications would be accepted. The volunteers were detailed to the Parachute School at Fort Benning, Georgia, for parachutist qualification training. The company cadre for the trainees was provided by the 555th PIB from Camp Mackall; they were detailed to the Parachute School for a period of four weeks per training company.²⁵

The cadre was responsible for processing prospective fillers through "A-stage" and administratively caring for them through the remaining training period. The first company cadre departed Camp Mackall for Fort Benning in December 1944; it consisted of one officer and seventeen enlisted men. Training class sizes were approximately 200 men. Most of these personnel, up to sixty percent, would be rejected for various reasons with most failing to meet physical requirements. With the high rejection rate and a relatively small group who actually completed training, the battalion never did acquire more than sixty-six percent of its authorized strength. The unit had been promised that upon reaching eighty percent of its authorized strength, it could

embark on a formal training program. The lack of enlisted fillers prevented the battalion from conducting a formal training program during the period November 1944 to May 1945.²⁶ Since the battalion never reached that level, training time was spent qualifying personnel with individual and crew served weapons, conducting and instructing cadre schools, details, and putting on parachuting demonstrations.²⁷

In March 1945, the battalion was ordered to skeletonize all but one reinforced company to train for a possible combat mission. Personnel now felt that they were finally getting the opportunity to conduct the type of training required to prepare them for combat. However, after four weeks of the eight week training program, the training was halted and the unit was alerted for a classified security mission in the western part of the United States.²⁸ With the war in Europe drawing down, it seemed unlikely that more paratroopers would be needed thus preventing the 555th PIB from making another first in the annals of combat operations. In late April, the unit received orders for a permanent change of station to Pendleton Air Base, Pendleton, Oregon for duty with the U.S. Ninth Service Command.²⁹ On May 5, 1945, the unit left Camp Mackall for its new station in Pendleton, Oregon. Without the knowledge of what the unit would be doing in Oregon, some thought that they may be heading for action in the Pacific.

ENDNOTES

1. Lawrence H. Beavers, "555th Parachute Infantry," December 19 , p. 4.
2. Bradley Biggs, The Triple Nickels: Americas First All Black Paratroop Unit, p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 7.
4. Beavers, p. 4.
5. William B. Breuer Collection, "The Triple Nickels,"
6. Biggs, p. xii.
7. Ibid., p. 9.
8. Philip Mcguire, He Too Spoke for Democracy, p. 32.
9. Beavers, p. 6.
10. Biggs, p. 15.
11. Ibid., p. 15.
12. Ibid., p. 18.
13. Beavers, p. 9.
14. Biggs, p. 19.
15. Ibid., p. 23.
16. Ibid., p. 26.
17. Beavers, p. 11.
18. Biggs, p. 30.
19. Beavers, p.12.
20. Biggs, p. 27.
21. Ibid., p. 32.
22. Ibid., p. 37.
23. Ibid., p. 38.
24. Ibid., p. 37.

25. 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion Historical Data, p.
26. Ibid., p. 3.
27. Ibid., p. 3.
28. Ibid., p. 3.
29. Biggs, p. 51

CHAPTER IV

FIRE-FLY OPERATIONS IN OREGON

On May 12, 1945, the unit arrived at Pendleton Field, Oregon, and was assigned to the U.S. Ninth Service Command headquartered at Fort Douglas, Utah. Since their equipment did not arrive by rail until two weeks later on May 12, 1945, the unit conducted very little training. The Army Air Base had very few facilities for training ground troops so extra emphasis was placed on physical conditioning, leadership, first aid, and map reading.¹ The battalion's mission was to recover and destroy Japanese balloon bombs that had traveled across the Pacific Ocean on hydrogen-filled balloons. Their secondary mission was to suppress forest fires caused by the bombs.

Thousands of bombs were launched beginning in November 1944, but they had tapered off by the time the 555th PIB arrived in May. Apparently, the primary purpose of this effort was to improve morale at the Japanese war plants. The workers were told that the balloons were bombing Los Angeles or Seattle.² In a radio interview from Washington on May 29, 1944, Mr. Lyle Watts, Chief of the U.S. Forestry Service, described the balloons in detail.

The balloons, he said, were made of five layers of silk paper and were thirty-five feet in diameter. Filled with hydrogen, they would rise to a height of 25,000 to 35,000 feet. Then they would pick up the prevailing air currents (later called the "jet stream") from west to east across the Pacific.

Each time a balloon descended below 25,000 feet from loss of gas, a barometric pressure switch automatically dropped a sandbag. This caused the balloon to rise

again toward the 35,000 foot level. The balloons traveled up to 125 miles an hour, Mr. Watts said, and took from 80 to 120 hours to reach the U.S., depending on the weather. If the Japanese have figured it right, he added, the last sandbag has been dropped only after the balloon has reached this country. At that time, he said, a second automatic switch takes over.

When the balloon drops to 27,000 feet, a bomb is released, Watts continued. The balloon goes back up and then down again, and another bomb is released and so on.....When the last incendiary is dropped, a fuse is ignited automatically and sets off a demolition charge which destroys the balloon. Fortunately, all of the demolition charges didn't work, he added, and some of the balloons have been recovered intact.³

The mission to destroy these bombs and suppress the follow-on fires became known as the "Fire-Fly Project". The battalion became familiar with the scope of what they were required to do which included receiving training in techniques of forest fire suppression and bomb disposal. They were taught techniques of jumping in small groups in timber, and undertaking that was quite different from Army jumping techniques. After completing this training, the battalion was qualified as "Smoke Jumpers".⁴ This was another first recorded for the Army.

The racial climate at Pendleton Air Base was no better than what the unit had experienced at Fort Benning and Camp Mackall. The commander made it clear that he disliked having an all-Black unit on base. He also made sure that the Black soldiers did not mix with his White personnel. The civilian community shared the same views as the commander and Black soldiers found it difficult to buy a drink or eat a meal in the town of Pendleton. The atmosphere was similar to that of the deep South. In the face of

these attitudes, the men of the 555th PIB continued to take pride in themselves and their abilities. They even staged demonstration jumps for the local populace.⁵

The battalion was responsible for an area divided into four regions that included Northern California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Idaho. They participated in 36 fire missions from July to October 1945, which involved more than 1,200 individual jumps. More than thirty men suffered injuries ranging from cuts and bruises to broken legs and crushed chests. One person was lost attempting to extricate himself from a tree.⁶ Based upon its fire suppression activities, the battalion formalized standard operating procedures and provided lessons learned and recommendations that would be used by the future Army in airborne fire suppression operations.⁷

While at Pendleton, the unit was also involved in another first. With a group of fifty-four men, they helped to train a group of naval pilots preparing to go overseas. On July 25, 1945, they jumped with combat equipment and live ammunition, made an initial assault on a target to mark it, and then called in air support to strafe and bomb it. The success of this training was greatly appreciated by the squadron commander and the 555th PIB became the first Black paratroopers to serve with the U.S. Navy in a joint operation.⁸

ENDNOTES

1. 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion Historical Data, p. 4.
2. Bradley Biggs, The Triple Nickels: Americas First All Black Paratroop Unit, p. 59.
3. Ibid., p. 61.
4. Historical Data, p.5.
5. Biggs, p. 62.
6. Ibid., p. 67.
7. Historical Data p. 6.
8. Biggs, p. 72.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHANGES START

The battalion returned to Camp Mackall, North Carolina in October 1945, after successfully completing the balloon bomb disposal and fire suppression missions in the Northwest. It was assigned to 27th Headquarters and Headquarters Special Troops, First Army, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and was utilized almost entirely for post support details. Very little military training was conducted.¹

In December, the unit was assigned to the 13th Airborne Division and proceeded to discharge personnel and make plans for participating in the "New York City Victory Parade." In February 1946, the unit was relieved from attachment to the 13th Airborne Division and attached to the 82d Airborne Division. The 555th PIB remained in the attachment status for a number of years as was the pattern for most Black combat units.

In January 1946, the 555th PIB marched with the 82d Airborne Division, commanded by Major General James Gavin, up Fifth Avenue in the "New York City Victory Parade." Since the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was not an integral part of the 82d Airborne Division, General Gavin did not have to let them march in the parade. However, he did permit them to march and wear the symbols of the 82d's proud record.² His vision and respect for the Black soldier was very much different from that of his contemporaries.

Traditional racism continued at Fort Bragg and in the Fayetteville area. Post recreation facilities and clubs remained off-limits to Black soldiers and Blacks were restricted to the balcony of the theatre in Fayetteville. Black military families lived in converted Army barracks in an area called Spring Lake and rode in the back of the bus to and from Fayetteville.³

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion remained primarily a display unit. It participated in Chicago's Army Day Parade with units of the 5th Infantry on April 6, 1946. On July 4, 1946, the unit participated in the Kingston, North Carolina, Independence Day Parade.⁴ In the rush to demobilize, the unit dropped in strength to 192 personnel by March 1946. However, the unit sent out recruitment teams to training centers to recruit members and by November, the battalion had reached a peak of thirty-six officers and 1,309 men. They had become the largest battalion in the Army, yet another first.⁵

General Gavin used 555th PIB personnel to test new marshalling and dispersion techniques for airborne units. Since 1947 brought with it the threat of missiles in the atomic age, airborne marshalling and dispersion techniques could no longer be implemented as in WWII. He was familiar with their jumping experience in "Operation Fire-Fly" and that they were the first large group to jump from the CG4A glider. Therefore, he felt that they were an ideal unit to demonstrate his new dispersion and marshalling techniques. Simply put, the technique involved moving through a series of five stations each five miles apart to

accomplish what normally was done at one location. As the "atomic age battalion," the unit performed these airborne tactics so well that they were selected as the Army unit for combined Army-Air Corps-Navy shows.⁶

The 555th PIB was attached to the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) in July 1947. The unit was also selected to take part in a joint operation exercise involving Army, Navy and Air Force units. The exercise lasted from September 18 through October 31, 1947.⁷ This operation "Operation Combine I," was staged out of Lawson Field at Fort Benning, Georgia, and included four jumps during the exercise period. The unit performed so well during the exercise that they were selected to participate in "Operation Combine II" which was to be conducted at Eglin Field, Florida in 1948.⁸

Changes started happening very quickly during this period. The 555th PIB was relieved from attachment to the 504th PIR and attached to the 505th PIR on October 29, 1947. On December 9, 1947, the 555th PIB was designated 3d Battalion, 505th Airborne Infantry Regiment, of the 82d Airborne Division.⁹ This marked the end of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion as an all-Black unit because it was then that it received its first White battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Linnell.¹⁰

SUMMARY

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was indeed a genesis for change. General Marshall authorized the formation of the

test platoon in 1943 and with little fanfare and publicity, the unit trained and proved that it could perform all missions and tasks as well as any other unit. They maintained an outstanding record of achievement and dispelled the belief that Black soldiers were less competent than their White contemporaries. They made a valiant effort to reach and maintain a battalion strength level to conduct advanced combat training but were unable to do so. This advanced training was the key, they believed, in becoming an active fighting unit in the war. This was not to be with the war winding down in 1945.

The 555th PIB can take credit for a number of firsts. It was the first unit to jump in large numbers from the CG4A glider. It was the first airborne army unit to train and become "smoke jumpers." It was the first unit to train and demonstrate General Gavin's marshalling techniques for airborne operations as an atomic age concept. It was the first unit to demonstrate joint airborne-naval-air force combat operations concepts. It eventually became the largest airborne battalion in the U.S. Army in November 1946.

The most significant first that happened to the unit occurred in December 1947 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. This event was an indication of the outstanding effort the unit made in changing the beliefs of how Blacks should be utilized in the Army. It was also the final act in the existence of an outstanding and elite unit. On December 9, 1947, General Gavin officially integrated the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion into the 82d Airborne Division as the 3d Battalion, 505th Airborne

Infantry Regiment. Even though President Truman's Executive Order 9981 was not signed until July 26, 1948, General Gavin had demonstrated his resolve to make a historical change. He also insured Black soldiers were not restricted to their battalion jobs but also assigned to responsible positions in the division staff.

The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was truly a genesis for the changes that would occur to affect how Blacks would be utilized in the future Army.

ENDNOTES

7. 1. 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion Historical Data, p.
2. Bradley Biggs, The Triple Nickels: Americas First All Black Paratroop Unit, p. 74.
3. Ibid., p. 75.
4. Historical data.
5. Biggs., p. 79.
6. Ibid., p. 79.
7. Historical data.
8. Biggs, p. 80.
9. Historical data.
10. Biggs, p. 80.

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8. Motley, Mary P. The Invisible Soldier. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1975.
9. 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion Historical Data, 25 November 1944 through November 1947, National Archives, Washington, D.C.